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Spillover

Abstract

Discussion of the positive and negative effects of work-family spillover: the transfer of mood, affect, and behavior between work and home.

Keywords

work, family, spillover, home, management, satisfaction, job, productivity, stress

Comments

Suggested Citation

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Spillover

Patricia V. Roehling, Phyllis Moen, and Rosemary Batt

I can remember times in our marriage that I have said to her “this isn’t work, this is home, this is family”; you cannot separate work and family totally but I have learned to come home and shake myself of everything.

—Fifty-two-year-old teacher speaking about
the difficulty his wife (who is a
consultant) has in separating work
and family

As we show throughout this volume, traditional customs and practices of societal institutions are out of step with the needs of contemporary couples. Work-family spillover, the transfer of mood, affect, and behavior between work and home,¹ is one of the consequences associated with this structural lag. The simultaneous management of work and family domains in a world that treats them as separate spheres can lead to strains and conflict. But it also offers the possibility of gains. In fact, spillover between work and family can be both positive and negative. Positive spillover occurs when satisfaction and stimulation at work translate into high levels of energy and satisfaction at home. Negative spillover occurs when problems and conflicts at work drain and preoccupy individuals, negatively impacting their behavior and experiences with their families.²

Work-family spillover has important ramifications for the functioning of the workplace as well as the well-being of employees and their families. For example, research shows that negative spillover and work-family conflict relate to higher rates of absenteeism, turnover, and exhaustion along with lower levels of productivity, job satisfaction, and job commitment.³ High negative spillover and conflict are also associated with a lower quality of family life, greater marital conflict, poorer health, and higher levels of psychological strain, depression, stress, and problem drinking.⁴

The goal of this chapter is to promote a fuller understanding of the concept of spillover. In the first section, we review the research on the spillover between work and family; we discuss theoretical models of how people manage their work and family roles, highlight the most important empirical findings, and identify current limitations in the literature. In the second section, we draw on our findings from *The Cornell Couples and Careers Study*, focusing on the incidence of spillover among couples and over the life course: How do the characteristics of one spouse influence the spillover experienced by the other? How does spillover vary across life stage? What family and workplace variables affect the spillover of the worker and their spouse? To answer these questions, we draw on both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups and in-depth interviews) data.

Historical Overview of the Spillover Literature

Scholarly understanding of work-family spillover has grown significantly since the 1960s. Early research in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the correlation between the quality and satisfaction of work life and the quality and satisfaction of nonwork life.⁵ Three major models help us understand this relationship: compensation, segmentation, and spillover. According to the compensation model, people compensate for dissatisfaction in one domain by trying to find more satisfaction in the other domain (i.e., work and nonwork satisfaction are negatively correlated).⁶ The segmentation model posits that employees compartmentalize work and nonwork life so that emotions and stresses from one domain remain independent from the other domain (i.e., work and nonwork satisfaction have a correlation of zero).⁷ The spillover model posits that experiences in one domain spill over into and influence the other domain (e.g., work and nonwork satisfaction are positively correlated).

Although research evidence exists for all three relationships, the majority of workers and families fit the spillover model.⁸ For example, using data from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey, a 1994 analysis found that 68 percent of

workers met the criteria for spillover (work satisfaction and nonwork satisfaction positively correlated), 20 percent for segmentation (minimally correlated), and 12 percent for compensation (negatively correlated).⁹ It is estimated that the correlation between work and nonwork satisfaction is between 0.40 and 0.48.¹⁰ Segmentation and compensation, when they do occur, are more likely to characterize employees in nonprofessional occupations and workers who have encountered disappointments in their career.¹¹

A major problem with correlational studies is the difficulty inferring causation from them. To circumvent this problem, scholars have developed measures of spillover that directly assess the transfer of emotions, stresses, and behaviors from one domain to the other domain (e.g., “job worries distract you when you are at home”). This permits the direct assessment of spillover rather than relying on a correlation to infer its presence. Moreover, scholars have moved away from simple correlational studies to more complex research designs and analyses (such as multivariate, longitudinal, and path analytic studies).

Work-Family Conflict and Interference

The work-family conflict and interference research is closely related to and has developed concurrently with research on spillover. Studies on conflict and interference are rooted in role theory, which argues that role conflict (and role overload) occurs when there is a “simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures such that the compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other.”¹² Work-family conflict and work-family interference are the direct result of incompatible pressures from an individual’s work and family roles. Both the conflict and interference research and the spillover research examine the transfer of emotions and behaviors from work to home and from home to work. However, the conflict and interference research also assesses the intrusion of tasks from the work role into the family and vice versa. A second difference between the spillover research and the conflict and interference research is that spillover denotes the transfer of negative and positive emotions from one domain to the other. This is in contrast to the conflict and interference research, which focuses solely on the deleterious nature of the work-family interface (analogous to negative spillover).

Because they are so closely related, we review here the evidence on both spillover and conflict and interference. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to this simply as spillover, but when discussing specific findings we employ the terms used by the researchers (conflict, interference, or spillover) to describe the work-family relationship.

Work and Family Career Dynamics: The Impact of Career on Family and of Family on Career

The extent and direction of the links between work and family are important issues for both employers and employees. A growing consensus finds that employment has more of a negative impact on family life than family life has on work life. Four studies—one using daily reports recorded at random intervals, and three using cross-sectional survey methods—show that, for both men and women, work interferes with family more than family interferes with work.¹³

One explanation for the greater level of work-to-family spillover is the relative inflexibility of work life compared to family life. In most cases, employees are required to work a set number of hours, with the scheduling and location of work relatively fixed. Family roles, however, have no external guidelines for the amount of time that must be devoted to family members or the location in which family interactions must take place. When work-family conflicts do arise, workers can hire others to perform many domestic duties (e.g., child care, cleaning, and cooking), which is rarely the case for workplace responsibilities. As a result of this relative inflexibility, demands at work tend to invade and dictate the pace and timing of family life.

A second explanation is that employees typically have less control over decisions in their work life than they do in their family life. For example, employers dictate and may alter the hours, location, or conditions of work without notice, whereas workers exert more control over such decisions on the home front. A 1995 study of health-care professionals (nonphysicians) showed that when employees have greater influence over decisions at work, they are more able to balance work and family demands.¹⁴ Similar findings emerge in *The Cornell Couples and Careers Study*.

Factors Influencing Spillover

Role Involvement

According to the scarcity hypothesis, the more committed a person is to a particular role, the greater the chance of conflict or interference with other roles.¹⁵ Consistent with this hypothesis, several studies have found that spillover is related to level of role involvement. Scholars have found that the more involved or the more central an individual's work role, the greater the reported level of work-family conflict.¹⁶ Hours spent at work, typically viewed as an objective measure of role involvement, has also been positively related to work-family interference and negative spillover, particularly among women.¹⁷ Involvement in the family

role also predicts work-family conflict. Ego involvement in parenting (but not the actual hours spent in the parental role) and high levels of family involvement predict greater negative work-to-family spillover.¹⁸

Involvement in either work or family roles increases not only the likelihood of work-family conflict and negative spillover, but also the likelihood of positive spillover. In a study of Canadian managers and Canadian business school alumni, scholars found greater parental role involvement to be associated with workers' perceptions of greater benefits, both at home and at work.¹⁹ Note, however, that such benefits are not linked to the amount of time spent in the parenting role. In fact, for this sample of business school alumni, time spent in active parenting is negatively correlated with positive spillover.²⁰ Thus, positive spillover appears to be a function of the value that workers place on the parenting role and the quality of the interaction between parents and children, not the amount of time that workers spend in parenting. This echoes the mantra that it is the quality not the quantity of the family time that is important.

Gender

The relationship between gender and spillover is complex and can best be understood by examining family-to-work spillover and work-to-family spillover separately. Given that women identify more strongly with the family role than do men²¹ and spend more time with their children than do men,²² we expect that women also experience more family-to-work spillover than do men. Empirical evidence regarding this hypothesis is mixed, however. A longitudinal daily diary study²³ and two cross-sectional surveys²⁴ found that men experience greater family-to-work spillover than women. However, two other studies, one of which was also a daily diary study, found that women experience greater family-to-work spillover than do men, particularly women with young children.²⁵ Three other studies show no difference between men and women on degree of family-to-work interference.²⁶ These studies lead to the conclusion that there is no definitive story linking gender with negative family-to-work spillover.

There is a clearer picture regarding the relationship between gender and work-to-family spillover. Four studies find women experience greater levels of negative work-to-family spillover and work interference with family than do men.²⁷ Three studies report no gender differences, and one provides evidence that men experience more time-based work-to-family conflict than do women.²⁸ Given that women report levels of work commitment similar to men²⁹ and that women spend more time than men engaged in housework and child care, it is not surprising that, in many studies, women report the highest levels of work-to-family spillover and interference.

Context: Work-Related Variables

The contexts in which employees work and live influence their experience of spillover. Several studies confirm that the more flexible and supportive the workplace, the less interference and negative spillover there is from work to home. Specifically, having a supportive supervisor³⁰ and having supportive coworkers³¹ are related to lower levels of negative work-to-family spillover and conflict. Degree of autonomy at work,³² work variability,³³ and employee control over decisions at work³⁴ are also related to less work-to-family spillover. Finally, substantial evidence suggests that the use of flextime is related to lower levels of work-family interference.³⁵ These supportive practices and policies clearly help employees to alleviate some of the stresses and conflicts associated with integrating work and family roles.

On the other hand, some workplace conditions lead to higher levels of negative work-to-family spillover. Not surprisingly, jobs that are high in stress and conflict are related to higher levels of negative spillover from work to home.³⁶ A heavy workload and time pressures are also related to more work-family conflict and spillover.³⁷ Finally, among men, schedule inflexibility is linked to greater work-family conflict.³⁸ Thus, a demanding, stressful, and inflexible job often results in the spillover of stresses and frustrations into the home.

Context: Family-Related Variables

An important part of the context in which an individual lives is the family environment. Several characteristics of the family have an impact on spillover. Not surprisingly, research suggests that employed parents experience greater negative work-family spillover than employed nonparents.³⁹ Problems with child care are a special dilemma that is linked to greater negative family-to-work spillover.⁴⁰ However, as children get older and the workload associated with parenthood decreases, the family-to-work spillover also decreases.⁴¹ The number of children in the home is also related to spillover, with larger families reporting higher levels of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict.⁴² Surprisingly, studies have not found greater levels of family-to-work interference among single parents compared to partnered parents.⁴³ Although single parents have less support than parents with partners, they also have one less role (the role of spousal partner). This trade-off may account for the similarity of family-to-work spillover among partnered and unpartnered parents. Meshing work and parenthood can also be a positive experience—a 1993 study found that parenthood was associated with more positive as well as negative family-to-work spillover, especially for women.⁴⁴

The ways in which husbands and wives balance their work and family responsibilities also influences spillover. Men with nonemployed wives report lower

levels of negative spillover from work to family compared to those in two-earner households.⁴⁵ This is not surprising—men married to full-time homemakers are likely to devote less time and attention to domestic tasks, which translates into less spillover between the two domains. Finally, the more perceived support individuals receive from family members, the less work-family conflict they report experiencing.⁴⁶

Linked Lives: Marital and Parental Relationships

To fully understand the relationship between work and family, we need to incorporate the perspective of linked lives. People do not live in a vacuum. Rather, they are socially interdependent. Relationships with spouses and children impact workers' experiences and relationships at work and vice versa.⁴⁷ For example, a 1993 study of Boston-area dual-earner couples found that the strains associated with poor marital and parental relationships spill over into and negatively affect relationships and experiences at work. Conversely, workers who report having quality relationships with their children and spouse say that their family life enhances their experiences at work.⁴⁸

Stressors and relationships at work can also influence the quality and tone of interactions with family members. Rena Repetti and her colleagues found that on days characterized by high workloads, both mothers and fathers are more behaviorally and emotionally withdrawn from their children when they return home from work. In addition, among fathers, unpleasant interactions with coworkers are often followed by more negative interactions with their children.⁴⁹

Marital interactions are also affected by events at work. This is called crossover or stress contagion. Crossover occurs when the stresses that people experience at work lead to stresses for their spouse at home.⁵⁰ A 1989 longitudinal study of dual-earner couples found that on days when men report feeling overloaded at work their wives report feeling overloaded at home later that evening.⁵¹ Wives' feelings of overload at work, however, did not appear to impact husbands' feelings of stress or overload in the home. Similarly, a 1993 study of dual-earner couples also found the crossover of stress from work to home occurs primarily from the husbands' job to their wives, but not vice versa.⁵²

The mutual work arrangements of a couple matter as well. Jeffrey Greenhaus and associates have found that work-family conflict is greatest when husbands and wives have very different levels of job involvement. And conflict is lowest among couples in which both members have a high level of job involvement.⁵³ This suggests that if both members of a couple share a common orientation toward work, they may be less likely to put pressure on one another to change their arrangements. Problems also arise when one spouse reports that his or her career has higher priority than his or her spouse's career.⁵⁴ Finally, Phyllis Moen

and Yan Yu found less conflict and stress among dual-earner couples if both members work approximately the same full-time hours but neither spouse puts in long (more than forty-five) hours.⁵⁵

Spillover in *The Cornell Couples and Careers Study*

In our study, we extend the spillover research in several ways. First, we focus on workers who share a particular context: dual-earner middle-class couples. The demands of dual careers and professional work in our sample provide the opportunity to examine spillover when the range and intensity of spillover are likely to be high. We also examine gender differences between men and women who face quite similar professional demands at work.

Second, most of the conflict and interference and the spillover research has focused on the negative aspects, the strains, of integrating work and family roles, whereas we consider positive as well as negative spillover. We also identify the strategies that dual-earner couples employ to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of meshing work and family life.

Third, by taking a couple-level perspective in our spillover analyses, we examine the linked lives of working men and women, a dimension most scholars have ignored. Couple-level research suggests that spousal behaviors, emotions, and characteristics are likely to play a significant role in the other spouse's experience of work-family spillover. We therefore use information gathered from both members of our dual-earner couples to understand the relative levels of spillover experienced by husbands and wives and how the work experiences of one member of a couple affect their partners' sense of spillover.

Fourth, we take a life course perspective, which gives us a snapshot of the work and family career dynamics that occur as men and women move through different work and family roles. Previous studies that have taken a life stage approach to understanding spillover have, with few exceptions, only defined two life stages: parenthood and nonparenthood.⁵⁶ Our seven life-course stages permit a better understanding of how the benefits and stresses associated with work and family vary across the life course for both men and women.

Finally, we examine the effect of a variety of work and family characteristics on spillover and the strategies that people use for managing work and family. We consider family constraints (such as the time spent in household chores and dependent care), as well as work-related variables (such as hours of work, workload, and control over scheduling). Of particular interest are family and work strategies (the use of computer technology, telecommuting, and flextime) for increasing the efficiency of running the home and/or to increase the flexibility of work. Each of these characteristics is measured for both self and spouse.

Methods

Our respondents are dual-earner couples ($N = 811$) in *The Cornell Couples and Careers Study* (see app.). We analyze the data using basic descriptive techniques as well as repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and ordinary least squares (OLS) hierarchical regressions. We use a repeated-measures analysis of variance rather than one-way ANOVAs because husband and wife spillover scores are not independent of one another. With a repeated-measures ANOVA, the couple is treated as the unit of analysis and husband and wife spillover scores are treated as separate observations within the same unit. Previous studies have not compared the spillover scores of husbands and wives; rather, they have compared the scores of employed men and women, without taking into account the specific employment circumstances of their spouse.

Measures

Spillover We use a shortened version of the spillover scale developed by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Network on Successful Midlife Aging. The scale assesses four types of spillover, measuring each type with two questions (scored on a five-point scale where 1 equals all the time and 5 equals never). Items were recoded so that a higher score represented greater spillover. The items were then averaged to form an index.

Life Stage Recall, the seven life stages consist of

two nonparent stages: young nonparents (ages 25–39) and older nonparents (ages 40+)

four stages with children in the home: launching, preschool-age children (ages 0–5); early establishment, young school-age children (ages 6–12); later establishment, adolescents (ages 13–18); and adult children (over 18 in the home)

one stage that includes parents of children who are grown and have left home: empty nest⁵⁷

Variables Used in Regression Equations To predict work-to-family spillover, we examine several work-related variables. Flexible work strategies include whether the respondent utilizes (1) flexible technology that allows workers to communicate with work while at home (whether respondents regularly use technology to work at home, including email, fax, beeper or cell phone, and a portable computer or home computer), (2) telecommuting (the ability to work at home for some portion of work time), and (3) flextime (the ability to arrange a work schedule to meet family or personal needs).

We assess three dimensions related to work conditions: workload, schedule control, and average weekly hours.

Workload. This is assessed by asking respondents whether their job requires them to work very hard and very fast and whether they are asked to perform excessive amounts of work. Responses are recorded on a four-point scale (from 1, strongly agree, to 4, strongly disagree).

Schedule control. This is assessed by a shortened version of a measure of control over areas at work.⁵⁸ The eight-item scale measures whether respondents are able to determine when to begin and end their workday, the number of hours they work, whether work can be done at home, the timing of vacations, the amount and timing of work that must be taken home on evenings or weekends, when to take a few hours off, and whether they are able to make or receive personal phone calls and emails while at work. Items are scored on a five-point scale (from 1, very little choice, to 5, very much choice).

Average number of hours worked per week. This is assessed by the respondents estimate of the amount of time, on average, spent at work, combining all jobs.

When predicting family-to-work spillover, we consider four family-related variables: the amount of free time, the time spent on dependent care, the time spent on household chores, and the time spent caring for infirm family members.

Work-to-Family versus Family-to-Work Spillover

Our findings on the relationship between work-to-family spillover and family-to-work spillover are consistent with previous studies. Specifically, even in this middle-class sample, we find that work has more of a negative impact on family than family has on work (see figure 7.1) for both women and men. Most employees in our study bring more worries and stresses home with them from work than they take from home to work. To function effectively at the workplace, most people compartmentalize their family concerns while at work. By contrast, family members are less effective at shielding their concerns at work from home. Note, however, that on average respondents report negative work-to-family spillover somewhere between rarely and sometimes, meaning that for most people in our sample, negative spillover from work to home (or vice versa) is not a major issue.

Moreover, respondents in our study also report that, for the most part, the benefits of combining work and family outweigh any drawbacks (see figure 7.1). On average, respondents report that positive spillover from family to work occurs

more frequently (between sometimes and most of the time) than negative spillover. Thus, family life enhances more than it hinders an individual's performance at work. Further, the couples in our sample report that home life enhances work life to a greater degree than work life enhances home life.

Spillover between Husbands and Wives

Previous research on gender differences in family-to-work spillover has been conflicting, with no clear pattern emerging. In our sample, we find that women report greater levels of negative family-to-work spillover and greater levels of positive family-to-work spillover than do men (see figure 7.1). Although relatively small, these differences are statistically significant. The added statistical power of our couple-level analysis may have allowed us to detect a significant difference that was too subtle for other studies to detect. We are not surprised to find women reporting slightly higher levels of family-to-work spillover than men. In our sample, women spend more time on household chores (2.6 hours vs. 1.9 hours on workdays) and, among parents, on child care (3.9 hours vs. 2.2 hours on workdays) than do men. The added roles in the home, combined with their work role is likely to translate into greater levels of both positive and negative spillover.

We do not find a significant difference between husbands and wives in negative work-to-family spillover. This contradicts prior studies that tend to show that wives display greater levels of negative work-to-family spillover than do husbands. It may be that the context for working women is changing. Middle-class female workers may be becoming more adept at leaving the concerns of the workplace behind when they are home, decreasing negative work-to-family spillover. At the same time, as middle-class men begin to invest more in the roles of parent and spouse, they may be experiencing an increase in work-to-family spillover.

We do find a small, but significant, difference between men and women on positive work-to-family spillover (see figure 7.1). Middle-class wives, when compared to their husbands, have a greater tendency to feel that being involved in work outside of the home enhances their effectiveness and emotional well-being in the home. Still, the small, and even nonsignificant, differences that we found between middle-class husbands and wives on spillover levels are consistent with a general trend in the work-family literature. As societal attitudes shift to reflect the changing demographics of the workforce, the differences between men and women in their orientation to work and family are disappearing.⁵⁹

Patterns of Spillover

Previously, researchers have treated positive spillover and negative spillover as separate processes and have not explored how positive and negative spillover

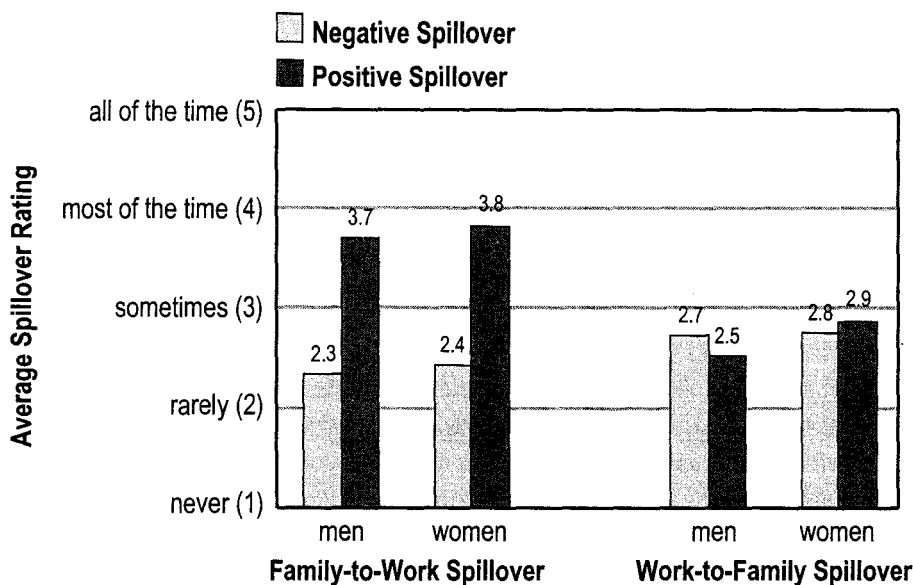


Figure 7.1 Work-to-family and family-to-work spillover among middle-class men and women in dual-earner couples. Source: *The Cornell Couples and Careers Study*, 1998 ($N = 1642$). Significant differences occur between negative work-to-family and negative family-to-work spillover ($t = 19.0, p < .01$); between negative family-to-work spillover and positive family-to-work spillover ($t = 53.6, p < .01$); and between men and women on positive work-to-family spillover ($t = 9.3, p < .01$), positive family-to-work spillover ($t = 2.5, p < .05$), and negative family-to-work spillover ($t = 3.4, p < .01$).

relate to one another. To identify the frequency of patterns that could occur between positive and negative spillover, we place respondents into categories based on whether they report a high level (average between 4 and 5, meaning they report experiencing spillover all or most of the time) or a low level (average between 1 and 2, meaning they report experiencing spillover rarely or never) of each type of spillover. Workers who report spillover sometimes (an average of 3) are not included in either of the high or low categories and are therefore excluded from these analyses. We then place respondents into categories based on their level of both negative and positive spillover.⁶⁰

Figure 7.2 shows how our middle-class families are distributed in these categories. Happily, the Family Optimal category is by far the most common pattern of spillover, with the majority of workers reporting high positive and low negative family-to-work spillover. Work Segmented is the second most common category. These workers report very little spillover from work to home, suggesting that they are able to compartmentalize experiences at work and not let them influence emotions and behaviors in the home. Approximately 10 percent reported Work Strain, with high negative and low positive work-to-family spillover. Family Strain, representing high negative and low positive family-to-work spillover, is a relatively rare category, representing only 1 percent of our sample. Most of our

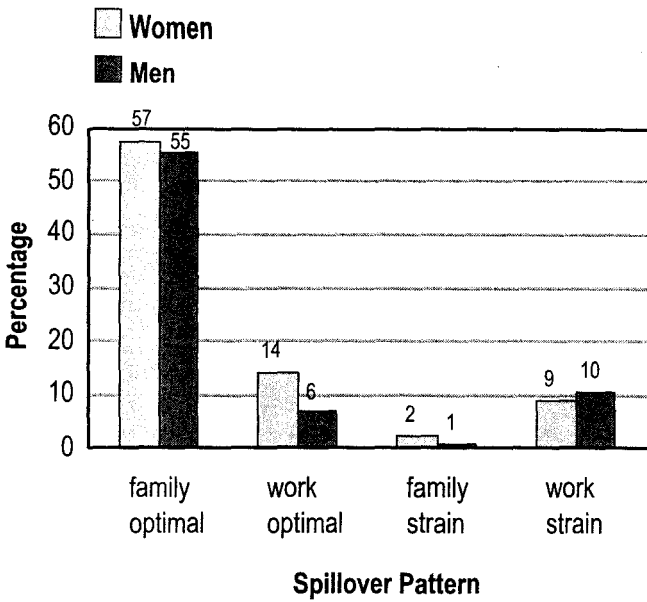


Figure 7.2 Distribution of types of spillover. Source: *The Cornell Couples and Careers Study*, 1998 ($N = 1604$, 803 couples).

respondents find that their work lives are enhanced by their family lives. Few feel that family is a detriment to their work.

Spillover by Industry Sector

We next examine how the work context is related to spillover. We operate under the premise that various industrial contexts, or sectors, experience different competitive pressures, which might translate into different levels of work and family spillover. Our sample is divided into four primary sectors: manufacturing, health care, higher education, and utility (see app.). For these analyses, we only use respondents who work in one of our seven participating companies. Because a significant portion of respondents in our sample fall into the Family Optimal, Work Optimal, or Work Strain categories, we use chi-square analyses to examine whether workers in various sectors are more or less likely to display these patterns of spillover.

Family Optimal spillover is consistently high for both men and women who work in higher education (66% of men and 44% of women in higher education fall into the Family Optimal category). Many of these respondents are faculty members, who have unusually flexible work hours. When not in the classroom, faculty have a great deal of discretion regarding their work schedule. This flexibility may allow them to mesh work and family needs more easily than other workers.

We also find that a large number of men (67%), but fewer of the women (44%), who work in the health-care sector report a Family Optimal spillover pattern. This gender difference may be due to the different types of positions that men and women in our health-care sector hold. Most of the women are in support or technical health-care positions (e.g., nursing and lab technicians), whereas most of the men are in management positions. Women in these nonmanagement positions tend to have fixed schedules, often including shift work, which may be less flexible and more difficult on the family. Employees in the utility and manufacturing sectors were the least likely to report a Family Optimal pattern of spillover (between 35% and 54%).

We find no significant differences among sectors on the Work Optimal pattern of spillover. However, we do find a significant difference among sectors on the Work Strain category. A greater percentage of men and women in the manufacturing sector report high levels of negative work-to-family spillover and low levels of positive work-to-family spillover (15% and 14%, respectively, in the manufacturing sector compared to 5%–9% of men and women in the other sectors). This may be because both of the organizations in our manufacturing sector were downsizing their workforces during our survey (see app.). Our focus-group interviews reveal that professional employees at these organizations are concerned about the security of their jobs and are also taking on the work and responsibilities of those who have been laid off. Thus, the context of downsizing, rather than the sector itself, is a plausible explanation for the higher work-to-family strain employees in the participating manufacturing firms experience. However, these firms are part of the competitive and hard-driving global economy, with (according to the focus-group interviews) demands and uncertainties clearly spilling over into the family lives of their employees.

Linked Lives between Husbands and Wives: Patterns of Symmetry in Family-to-Work Spillover

Curious about whether there are common patterns of spillover between husbands and wives, we categorized couples' spillover relationships as being either symmetric, asymmetric, or independent. A symmetric relationship is one in which both members of a couple experience similar levels of spillover from family to work. An asymmetric relationship exists when one spouse reports high levels of negative spillover and his or her spouse reports low negative spillover. A 46-year-old computer technician and mother of two children explains how, even among couples who share family responsibilities, the experience of spillover can be asymmetric: "... he [her husband] told me last night that he was headed to Buffalo today and wouldn't be back until tomorrow night and could I meet the sitter, stay late, all that kind of stuff. The routine has been that I get out the door

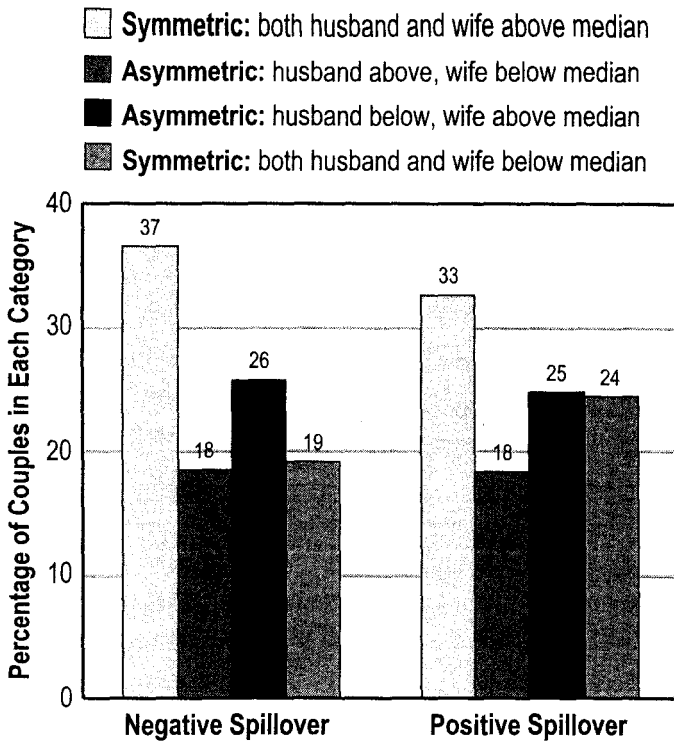


Figure 7.3 Distribution of couple-level family-to-work spillover scores. Source: *Cornell Couples and Careers Study*, 1998 ($N = 803$ couples).

first and he waits until the sitter arrives and then he leaves so it's like no advance notice and all of a sudden this morning I had to stay."

Similarly, a 40-year-old accountant with two school-age children describes her experiences regarding day-care arrangements: "... had someone very good, but whenever there was a problem, I'd mention it to 'Charlie' and he'd say, 'Oh, just hire somebody else.' Like you could just go out on the street. Another thing I think is hilarious is that they have both phone numbers at school, you know, mommies and daddies. And they never call the daddy."

To get a fuller understanding of the relationship between husbands' and wives' family-to-work spillover, we divide couples into four categories (two symmetric and two asymmetric) based on whether each member of the couple is above or below the median score for men and women on negative family-to-work spillover. Figure 7.3 illustrates the percentage of couples falling into each category of symmetry for negative and positive family-to-work spillover (the differences between groups was significant at the .01 level for both positive and negative family-to-work spillover). Overall, we find that a majority of couples are symmetric in their reports of family-to-work spillover. Over one-half of the couples are either both above or both below the median on positive and negative family-to-work spillover, meaning that they have a similar level of spillover experiences. When

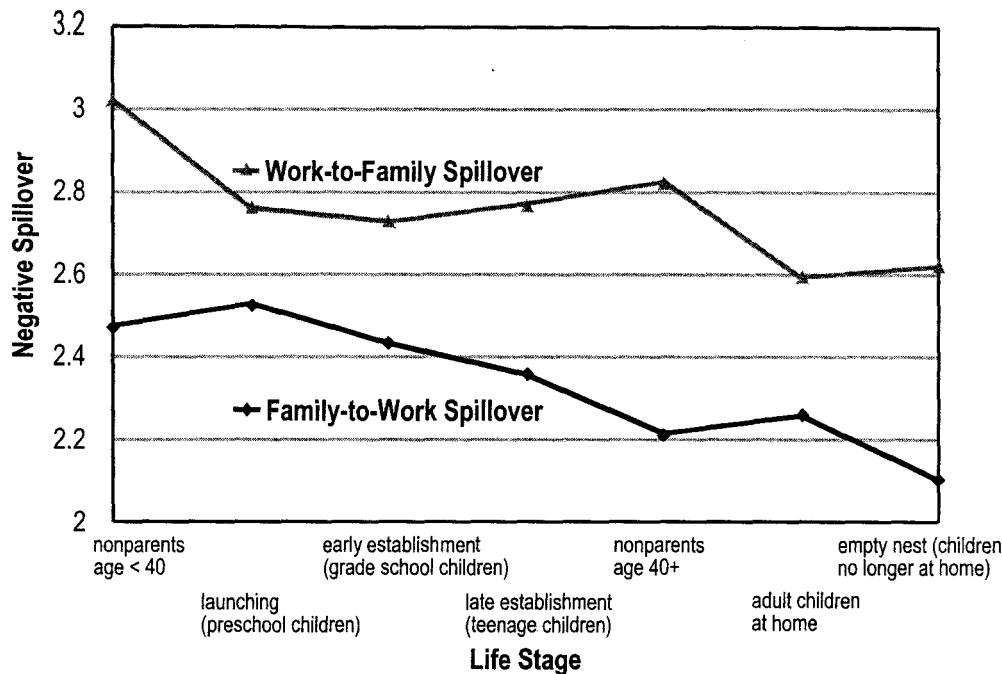


Figure 7.4 Negative spillover by life stage in middle-class dual-earner couples. Source: 1998 *Cornell Couples and Careers Study* (men $N = 802$, women $N = 802$). Family-to-work spillover difference between life stages: $F = 14.9$, $p < .01$. Work-to-family spillover difference between life stages: $F = 12.5$, $p < .01$.

there is an asymmetric relationship, it is typically the wife who reports high family-to-work spillover and the husband who reports low spillover. These findings suggest while family-to-work spillover in this sample of husbands and wives is best characterized as symmetric, there are families in which the wife bears the brunt of the negative spillover.

Work and Family Career Dynamics: Life Stage and Spillover

For each form of spillover, negative and positive, family-to-work and work-to-family, we perform an analysis of variance to assess whether spillover scores differ across life stages for both men and women. We are particularly interested in the impact of parenthood on spillover.

Family-to-Work Spillover

Our analyses reveal that the level of negative family-to-work spillover does vary significantly by life stage, for both men and women (both significant at the .01 level). Negative family-to-work spillover is relatively high for workers who have young children in the home and decreases as children get older (see figure 7.4). This

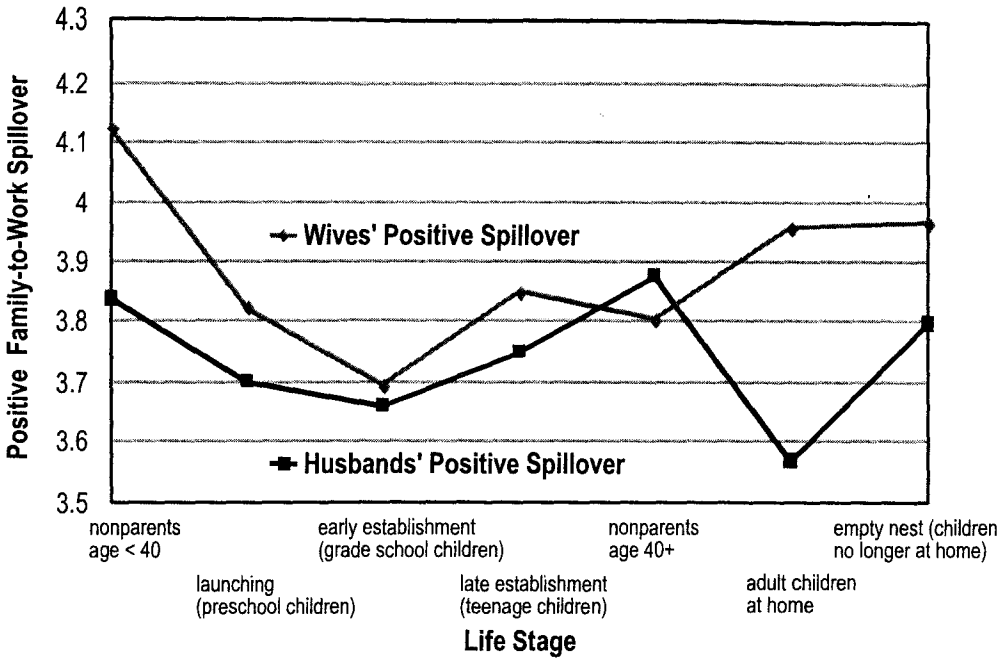


Figure 7.5 Positive family-to-work spillover across the life course in dual-earner couples. Source: 1998 *Cornell Couples and Careers Study* (men $N = 802$, women $N = 802$). Life stage $F = 14.9$, $p < .01$. Life stage \times gender interaction: $F = 3.2$, $p < .01$.

is consistent with the scarcity hypothesis,⁶¹ which predicts that combining the roles of employment and parenting is associated with higher levels of negative spillover. One unexpected finding is the relatively high negative spillover among young married men and women without children. This may reflect the struggles these young people face as they simultaneously adjust to both their marriages and their occupational careers.

Regarding positive family-to-work spillover, we find a statistically significant difference by life stage for women, but not men (see figure 7.5). Although positive family-to-work spillover scores are generally high (averaging close to 4 on a scale from 1 to 5), positive spillover is generally lower when children are in the home, but increases by the time the youngest child reaches his or her teen years. Taken together, we see that, as children become older and better able to care for themselves, they have less of a negative and more of a positive impact on women's and men's work life.

Work-to-Family Spillover

Negative work-to-family spillover varies across the life course (significant at the .01 level). The effect of life stage on negative work-to-family spillover is similar for men and women. As figure 7.4 illustrates, negative spillover from work to family is greatest for younger workers without children. This is the life stage at which men and women begin launching their careers but have not yet moved

into launching families. In our sample of young married couples without children, work evidently intrudes into the home at a relatively high rate. These men and women have few family commitments and tend not to separate their jobs from their home lives.

Interestingly, among dual-earner couples, parenthood is associated with less negative work-to-family spillover compared to men and women of comparable ages without children (young nonparent and older nonparent stages). We speculate that the presence of children may act to buffer parents from the stresses at work. Parents may be less willing to let the hassles and pressures from work invade their life at home, making a conscious effort to separate their work life from their family life. Children may also act to distract parents from the issues that they face at work. The bottom line, however, is that parenthood appears to help men and women achieve a greater separation of work from home (but not vice versa). Overall, negative work-to-family spillover tends to gradually diminish across the life course. As employees settle into their careers, they may learn how to juggle work and family so that they do not interfere as much with one another. Life stage is statistically unrelated to positive work-to-family spillover for both men and women.

Predicting Spillover

To identify which work- and home-related factors predict spillover, we perform eight separate hierarchical regressions—four for men (positive and negative work-to-family spillover and positive and negative family-to-work spillover) and four for women. Each regression equation has three steps. First, we control for psychological disposition (negative affect) and life stage. For family-to-work spillover, in the second step we assess whether the respondents' home-related variables and flexible work strategies influence spillover. Third, we examine whether the spouse's behaviors at home and flexible work strategies influence spillover. This third step allows us to discern how spouses' orientations to work and family are linked to the respondents' own experience of spillover. For work-to-family spillover, we follow these same steps, except that in the second and third steps we examine the impact of work-related variables and flexible work strategies on work-to-family spillover.

Predicting Family-to-Work Spillover

The more tasks and roles that individuals perform in the home, the greater the negative family-to-work spillover. Specifically, men who spend more time on household chores, and men and women who spend more hours at work (leaving fewer available for the home) report higher negative family-to-work spillover. In

the same vein, the more free time that husbands and wives report having at home, the lower their reports of negative family-to-work spillover (recall we control for negative mood and life stage).⁶²

Roles in the home also have implications for positive spillover. Husbands whose wives care for an infirm relative report lower levels of positive family-to-work spillover than husbands whose wives do not have this additional role. It is likely that women who care for an ill relative are less available to perform household tasks and to meet the needs of their immediate family, leaving their husbands to perform some of these tasks, which then detracts from their experiences at home. As the population ages and elder care becomes more prevalent, the impact of caregiving on worker and family well-being will become a more acute issue.

Work strategies also impact family-to-work spillover. The more hours that a wife works, the more positive spillover reported by her husband. This is consistent with previous research that shows that when husbands and wives have similar high levels of commitment to work, husbands report lower levels of work-family conflict.⁶³ It may be that wives who work relatively long hours are more supportive of their husbands' work and more willing to discuss work-related issues in the home, resulting in more positive home-to-work spillover. The opposite seems to be true for women. Wives whose husbands work relatively long hours report greater negative family-to-work spillover. Because of their husband's long hours (recall that the men in our sample work longer hours than the women), these women may shoulder a larger burden of home-related tasks, resulting in greater negative family-to-work spillover.

Flexible work strategies have a paradoxical relationship with family-to-work spillover. Women who bring work home report higher levels of both positive and negative spillover. They feel both enhanced and burdened by this strategy. In contrast, men who bring work home report greater positive family-to-work spillover only. Among men, working at home is a strategy that enhances their work life, without the corresponding downside that we find with women. Women, who are responsible for the majority of household tasks, may be overburdened at home when they also have to perform work-related tasks, leading to greater fatigue and stress in the workplace, which is not found among men.

Predicting Work-to-Family Spillover

Several work-related conditions significantly affect work-to-family spillover.⁶⁴ First, for both husbands and wives, control over when and where an individual works is associated with higher positive spillover. On the down side, a greater workload is associated with higher negative work-to-family spillover. In addition, husbands whose wives have heavy workloads tend to have lower levels of positive work-to-family spillover. High workloads and a lack of control at work are

both sources of stress for employees, which appears to negatively affect workers' experiences at home.

A more complicated picture emerges when we examine the relationship between spillover and workplace strategies that are designed to facilitate the meshing of work and family. For husbands and wives, bringing work home has the paradoxical effect of increasing both negative and positive work-to-family spillover. Further, wives whose husbands bring work home tend to report lower positive work-to-family spillover. The use of telecommuting, another strategy touted as an aid for working families, is related to lower levels of positive spillover among wives and also among wives whose husbands' telecommute. The use of flextime also has some negative consequences. When husbands use flex-time, wives report lower levels of positive work-to-family spillover. Interestingly, the use of these family-friendly policies appears to have more of a detrimental effect on the wife's spillover than on the husbands'. In addition, wives appear to be negatively impacted by their husbands' use of these family-friendly policies, but husbands are not impacted by their wives' use of the policies.

Although flexible work strategies seem to help workers cope with the multiple demands of work and family, they are not a panacea for the working couple (especially for the wife) but seem to be a double-edged sword. Strategies such as bringing work home are simultaneously related to enhancing and detracting from husbands' and wives' experiences at work and at home. Other flexible work strategies, such as telecommuting and flextime, are related to decreases in positive spillover for women and for wives whose husbands use these strategies.

Summing Up

In this chapter, we build on and extend prior research on spillover in several ways. We use a unique sample of dual-earner middle-class couples to show how shared contexts and linked lives of couples promote an understanding of positive and negative spillover between work and family. First, the most common pattern of spillover is Family Optimal; that is, almost 60 percent of respondents report high levels of positive family-to-work spillover and low levels of negative family-to-work spillover. Although negative family-to-work spillover does exist, it is not a major concern of workers in our middle-class, largely professional sample.

Second, most couples fit a symmetric model of spillover (e.g., low negative spillover for both husbands and wives), with husbands' and wives' experiences with spillover linked to a greater degree than we expected. These findings suggest that as women become more integrated into the workforce, differences in experiences between men and women are becoming smaller. The structural lag between the demography of the workforce and the social organization of work may be similar for both men and women. There are, however, a significant

number of couples who have asymmetric spillover. For example, some husbands report low negative spillover from home to work, whereas their wives experience relatively high negative spillover. Our interpretation is that in a substantial minority of cases the traditional relationship of asymmetry still exists; that is, the wives bear the brunt of negative spillover for both partners.

Third, life stage plays a significant role in how much spillover working spouses experience. Life stage captures the dynamic interplay between individuals' work careers and family careers. Husbands and wives with the greatest family demands are more likely to report higher levels of negative family-to-work spillover. This is particularly true for the wives in our study. Both spouses in later life stages tend to report less negative work-to-family spillover. Surprisingly, however, among husbands and wives under the age of fifty, having children in the home is related to less negative work-to-family spillover. These findings suggest that children may buffer their parents from the stresses of work.

Fourth, home conditions, work conditions, and flexible work strategies are significant determinants of spillover. Control over work schedules appears to enhance positive spillover, whereas heavier workloads predicts negative spillover. Flexible work strategies have complex effects that vary for men and women. For both husbands and wives, bringing work home acts as a double-edged sword, related to higher levels of both positive and negative spillover. Wives who telecommute and wives whose husbands telecommute, use flextime, and/or work at home tend to experience less positive spillover from their work and home lives. Thus, not only do women's own use of flexible work policies influence spillover, but their husband's use of those policies also affects spillover. Therefore, although these strategies make it easier for couples to combine work and family responsibilities, they may come at a cost to wives' (and a lesser extent to husbands') sense of spillover.

Note that our findings should be interpreted in the context of the sample population. Our sample does not include single individuals or single parents—that is, individuals who have opted not to marry or who have more challenges as single parents in balancing work and family. In addition, although a sample of middle-class couples is expected to have high work demands, these professionals also have more resources than do lower-income families. Future research, therefore, should include a wider range of workers to test whether our results can be generalized to individuals in other household and economic circumstances.

Our analysis of positive and negative spillover among dual-career couples at different life stages provides important insights into the complexities of work-family relationships. The effects of spillover from family to work and work to family heavily depend on the characteristics and strategies of the household as well as the circumstances at work, for individuals and for their spouses.